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SUBJECT: NUEVO LEON'S AMBITIOUS PLAN FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM LIKELY TO FALL SHORT

REF: A) 2006 MEXICO 5854; B) MEXICO 1150; C) MEXICO 1133

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1. (SBU) Summary. Despite statements by President Calderon on down that Mexico needs to fundamentally reform its educational system, to date no reform proposals have been forthcoming at the federal level. While Mexico has achieved nearly universal coverage in primary school education, international test results indicate that Mexican students still lag in critical thinking skills. Nuevo Leon should be an ideal location for educational reform, given its relatively high per capita income and levels of education. Indeed, the state government has an ambitious plan to transform its state educational system through certifying current teachers, selecting new teachers via tests rather than patronage, changing the teaching method, increasing the role of parents and introducing technology to empower students. However, based on interviews of academics, teachers, and school and union officials, although Nuevo Leon has incrementally advanced the ball on teacher selection, the prospects for fundamental educational reform seem doubtful. End Summary.

The Challenge: Mexican Schools teach Literacy, not Comprehension

2. (SBU) Mexico has substantially increased its educational spending and has achieved nearly universal literacy and primary school attendance. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Mexican spending on primary and secondary education increased 47% from 1995 to 2004, and 23% of public spending is invested in education, the highest percentage in the OECD. Over 90% of educational spending is for wages (80% for teachers and 10% for other staff). Mexico only spends 3.1% on capital spending (OECD average is 9%), and 5% on other current expenditures, such as instructional materials (OECD average 19.9%). (See also reftel A). According to the Mexican national statistical service INEGI, 91.6% of Mexican ages 15 and older are literate (up 4% since 1990), and 96% of Mexican children age 6-12 attend school. However, children begin to drop out in high school, as school attendance declines to 82.5% (ages 13-15), 47.8% (ages 16-19) and 20.8% (ages 20-24). Nuevo Leon is slightly better, with a 97.2% literacy rate, and Nuevo Leon school attendance is 96.9% (ages 6-12), 85.5% (ages 13-15), 45.8% (ages 16-18) and 20.7% (ages 20-24).

3. (SBU) Mexico has embraced student testing with enthusiasm, but Mexican students perform poorly by international standards. The PISA test is organized by the OECD and given to 15 year olds in all 30 OECD countries, evaluating mathematics, reading ability and comprehension and science. Mexican students took the PISA test in 2000, 2003 and 2006, but the results have not shown consistent improvement. In the 2006 PISA test Mexican

students improved 19 points in mathematics compared to 2000, but fell 12 points each in reading and science. Mexico still ranked last in the OECD in mathematics, reading and science in 2006, often by a significant margin. The OECD briefing notes indicate that Mexican students can identify scientific issues, but have difficulty analyzing data and experiments. The OECD commented that memorization of scientific facts is insufficient in today's job market.

14. (SBU) The 2006 PISA test results indicate that while Mexico stagnated, Nuevo Leon improved. The 2006 results demonstrate that Nuevo Leon students have registered significant gains since 2003, increasing their reading scores by 39 points to jump from the eighth place Mexican state to the first, gaining 24 points in mathematics to rise from seventh among Mexican states to third. Meanwhile, science scores rose 15 points as Nuevo Leon moved from seventh to fourth. However, Nuevo Leon's academic achievements are still low. In reading, for example, 29% of students score at levels 0 to 1 (insufficient to advance in school and work in a knowledge society), 32% were at level 2 (the minimum adequate in contemporary society), 37% were in levels 3 to 4 (good but below the highest cognitive level) and only 1.5% at the highest level 5. Similarly, in math 45% of Nuevo Leon students were in levels 0-1, 29% in level 2, 25% in levels 3-4, and only .8% in level 5. The scores were much the same in science, where 37% of students were in level 0-1, 37% in level 2, 26% in level 3-4, and only .3% in the highest level 5.

#### Mexico's Traditional School System

15. (SBU) President Calderon has just called for major reforms of the Mexican educational system, although real reform could be blocked by the powerful Mexican SNTE teachers union (see reftel B). The Mexican school system is still quite centralized, with the national government providing the lion's share of the funding and the national Secretary of Education determining curriculum and books. The SNTE teachers union has 1.4 million members nationally, and it is very powerful politically. The SNTE was a pillar in the PRI alliance when PRI controlled the

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Mexican political system for decades, but the SNTE sagely switched its support to PAN President Fox in 2000, and assisted President Calderon in the 2006 election. In addition the SNTE union serves as the base for the Nuevo Alliance party, which controls critical seats in the Congress (see reftel B). Despite increases in education funding, there is still little or no budget for school maintenance, so according to several teachers and academics, the parents either informally pay additional fees or they volunteer to clean up the school. The teachers also say that they often must pay for school essentials, such as paper or chalk, and class sizes are large. According to the OECD, an average Mexican secondary school classroom has 32 students (the OECD average is 14 students). Principals have limited control over their schools, because all of our contacts agree that it is virtually impossible to fire a teacher for any reason, and principals have been dismissed at the request of the union. Several educators thought that the principals could influence the schools by encouraging different teaching methods or the use of technology, but only if they maintain good relations with the union. The parents have very limited influence. Under a previous agreement with the union, parents were prohibited from entering the school while class was in session. Although parents now have some access to schools, they still have little or no influence.

16. (SBU) Mexican teachers normally are not university graduates, instead they attend teacher institutes and are selected for their positions by the union. Post's consular officers interview numerous teachers, and they report that the vast majority attend teacher institutes rather than university, and the few university graduates typically do not teach the subject they studied. Future teachers must take a tough test before entering the teacher institutes, but one institute official admitted that the applicants come from the bottom half of all students, so the teachers do not represent the best and

the brightest. Teachers do not need to take any certification test after they graduate, and the SNTE union, not the government or the school principal, normally decides if and where the students can work as a teacher. In the past, according to anecdotal reports, teacher positions were sometimes sold or inherited if the mother of the applicant was a teacher. According to news reports, between 80-100% of teacher positions are now assigned by the union nationwide. In Nuevo Leon, according to school officials, the union had less influence, as 50% of the positions were assigned by the union and 50% by the government. Our contacts stated that the SNTE union also controls movement of teachers into new jobs and promotions, so promotions can be based on friendships with union officials rather than merit.

17. (U) Although teachers and school officials universally lamented that teachers receive low salaries, the OECD analysis and Post consular interviews confirm that teacher salaries are significantly above the Mexican average. Moreover, public school teachers teach five hours per day, and many teachers hold second or third jobs at public or private school. Teachers also receive rich benefits packages, including yearly bonuses and a generous pension. Anecdotal evidence suggests that union officials can receive much higher salaries. Although teacher certification is not required, the federal government has a program for 'career magisterial' (roughly master teachers) whereby if teachers pass additional tests they receive more money. The teachers can rise to sub-director, director and superintendent/inspector if they continue to pass higher tests.

18. (SBU) According to news reports and our contacts, most Mexican teachers primarily teach through memorization. The leading newspaper El Norte stated that 66% of Mexican teachers teach through repetition, lecture and having the students repeat the information in chorus. According to this same report, due to these instruction methods, only 10% of Mexican students comprehend and can analyze what they have learned. Our contacts agree. A school official in Monterrey commented that he thought that 90% of the teachers were old school, using chalk and blackboard, and that they have few books in the classroom. A Nuevo Leon official agreed that teacher methods harken back to the 18th century in actual classrooms. Moreover, an official at a teaching institute confirmed that the primary teaching method is still memorization. Several contacts noted that teaching by memorization is the easiest method for the teacher and requires few skills.

19. (SBU) Although the SNTE union argues that additional teacher training is needed to improve the educational system, current training is not properly directed to improve teachers' skills. Econoff asked Nuevo Leon SNTE leader Juan Antonio Rodriguez what was needed to improve the educational system, and he immediately answered more training. However, federal

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Secretary of Education Josefina Vazquez Mota publicly decried

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that 80% of current teacher training teaches better self esteem or emotional intelligence. Although these courses may have some benefit, Vazquez Mota thought that since 75% of children in primary school do not understand what they read and the mathematics results are poor, teachers should receive instruction on how to better teach basic subjects. Our contacts could not confirm her estimate of teacher training courses, but they universally agreed that there are no guidelines on what training the teachers should receive, and no requirement that they take training courses useful in their teaching.

110. (SBU) Although private schools only educate 10% of students nationwide, 24.5% of Nuevo Leon students attend private school. In Econoff's interviews, our contacts thought that aside from a few model private schools, most private schools taught using the same methods as public schools. They further claimed that there was no difference in quality, but private

schools have more social prestige and some have better facilities. Our contacts emphasized that beyond some extremely well funded private schools, there are small private schools with a few poorly trained teachers in someone's house. In other words, there is great variation in the quality of private schools. However, an official at a teaching institute admitted that the public school teachers all sought to educate their own children in private schools. Private schools normally teach 6.5 to 7 hours per day, rather than the 5 hours taught in the public schools. The international PISA test found that private school students perform better, scoring 53 points higher than public school kids. However, according to the OECD analysis, when the socioeconomic background of students and schools is taken into account, public school students actually score 21 points better.

#### The Plan: Nuevo Leon's Ambitious Goal to Modernize School System

¶11. (U) Nuevo Leon's Secretary of Education, Dr Reyes Tamez Guerra (the former federal Secretary of Education under President Fox) has an exciting plan to modernize Nuevo Leon's educational system. Tamez agrees that the principal challenge for the Mexican educational system is quality, and the system must teach students to analyze, not just memorize. At present, Tamez stated, 70% of students do not have the required reasoning skills. Tamez noted Nuevo Leon's improving test scores, and he plans to build on this success by making Nuevo Leon one of the top three school systems in Mexico shortly and one of the ten best school systems in the world by 2017. These educational reforms fit perfectly with Nuevo Leon's general strategy to move into higher value-added industries and have the Monterrey area become a 'city of knowledge'. In addition, Nuevo Leon officials report that the World Bank is conducting a study of how Nuevo Leon successfully raised its academic achievement. Moreover, the World Bank is currently negotiating a program for Nuevo Leon to provide a combination of scholarships and grants to provide bright students from poor backgrounds the ability to attend college.

¶12. (U) Nuevo Leon's fundamental educational reform focuses on teacher selection, a certification test for current teachers, moving from memorization to teaching critical thinking, and improving the use of technology, symbolized by the Enciclomedia computer program. We understand that these changes can be made without state legislative approval. Secretary Tamez told Econoff that Nuevo Leon wants to select teachers through a test after graduation, and the candidates who score the best can choose their school. In addition, Nuevo Leon would require certification tests for existing teachers, and teachers will be given three years to pass before they are fired. Moreover, state officials report that the federal government is changing the method of instruction from memorization to teaching critical thinking skills in preschool and secondary school and will change it in primary school as well. Nuevo Leon wants to test students' reasoning ability and publish the results to put pressure on the school and the teachers. It also envisions empowering parents by providing test results and increasing their oversight role, more like the parent teacher associations in the United States. The crowning touch will be the Enciclomedia computer program (much like the Encarta program) that provides 3D interactive information about music, history, science, and language. (Note. The Enciclomedia program was established nationwide during the Fox Administration when Tamez was federal Secretary of Education, and has been dogged by charges of misspent public funds. End Note.) In particular, Secretary Tamez expects that Enciclomedia will help teachers who

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cannot speak English themselves to teach their students English.

#### The Reality: Incremental Change but Don't Expect a Revolution

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¶13. (SBU) The improved test scores indicate that Nuevo Leon is headed in the right direction, but there is no clear explanation

why test scores are up. Several academics dismissed the improved test scores by speculating that the students had become experienced test takers, or the teachers were now teaching to the test, but these theories do not explain why Nuevo Leon improved and other parts of Mexico stagnated. The World Bank is currently studying the issue, but it seems likely that there has been an improvement in teaching quality and method.

¶14. (SBU) Although Nuevo Leon has established new procedures for some teacher selection, it is unclear if it will certify teachers, change teaching methods, or empower parents. The good news is that through an agreement with SNTE, in April 842 teachers took a test to assign 325 teaching positions, and the results are to be released publicly. However, the outlook for other reforms is more doubtful. Econoff followed up his original meeting with Secretary Tamez with a meeting with a senior member of the Nuevo Leon schools. This contact reported that Nuevo Leon hoped for, but did not have, new resources for the reforms. In addition, he said that there would be no penalty if current teachers flunk their certification test, although they could receive incentives if they passed. Moreover, when asked about an additional role for parents, he speculated that perhaps they could provide school maintenance, hardly giving them a say in running the school. Finally, there has been progress on modernizing teaching methods, as our contacts believe that teaching methods are slowly changing as new teachers enter schools.

¶15. (SBU) Secretary Tamez touts the Enciclomedia program as the magic bullet to revitalize the Mexican school system. The Enciclomedia program constitutes a heavy investment of scarce resources, and Enciclomedia will be placed in all fifth and sixth grade classrooms. The Enciclomedia program is a wonder, and the student can explore Mayan sites in 3D, hear different instruments from an orchestra, or learn English even if the teacher cannot speak the language. The real questions are whether teachers use Enciclomedia and whether it is the right priority for a strapped educational budget. Econoff spoke to teachers, teaching instructors and university academics who agreed that most teachers did not use Enciclomedia, because they were uncomfortable with computers, they were not properly trained, or Enciclomedia was not incorporated into the curriculum. Moreover, a recent press report stated that 30% of Nuevo Leon schools lacked access to the internet or the ability to use the Enciclomedia program. (Note. Secretary Tamez has claimed that 100% of schools have facilities for Enciclomedia. End Note). In addition, our contacts all denounced the resources spent on Enciclomedia as a gold plate solution, while the school system neglected more fundamental needs.

¶16. (SBU) Finally, the Nuevo Leon reform can only succeed if the SNTE union signs off on plans to take away their power to select teachers, agrees to a certification test that could result in the dismissal of many long standing teachers, and changes teaching methods from memorization to a critical thinking approach using technology. Our contacts agree that the government cannot successfully oppose the SNTE teachers union. (see reftel B). When Econoff asked why the SNTE union would agree to these far reaching reforms, the Nuevo Leon school officials breezily replied that Mexican society was changing and that the SNTE union would agree, in part because the Nuevo Leon officials have a better relationship with SNTE than the federal Education Secretary Vazquez Mota. Although it is encouraging that SNTE agreed to distribute some teacher places through a test, during Econoff's meeting with the local SNTE union, Rodriguez primarily discussed how the media unfairly attacked SNTE, it was unfair to compare Mexico with Finland, and his strong support for the national union (see reftels B and C). There is no public indication that SNTE will voluntarily relinquish its privileges.

¶17. (SBU) Comment. Mexican officials, from President Caldron on down, realize the importance of improving the Mexican educational system to improve international economic competitiveness. In addition, the Nuevo Leon plan is very promising by focusing on improved teacher quality, modernizing the method of instruction, and empowering parents. However, despite some incremental steps forward, it seems doubtful that



the state government, in the last 18 months of its term can push through the tough reforms needed. It also seems very unlikely that the SNTE union would agree to such fundamental changes. Nuevo Leon is likely to take some small steps forward, but not nearly enough to fundamentally improve the educational system.  
End Comment.  
WILLIAMSON